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## U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE

DIRECTOR OF INTELLIGENCE AND RESEARCH

Research  
Memorandum

RSE-66, August 18, 1969

To : The Secretary  
Through: S/S  
From : INR Thomas L. Hughes *by h.c.d.*

ADVANCE COPY

Subject: USSR-CUBA: Soviet Naval Visit Reflects Improved Relations with Havana

A Soviet naval squadron visited Havana in July on a goodwill call and carried out maneuvers in the Gulf of Mexico before leaving the Caribbean in mid-August. This report assesses the significance of this event.

ABSTRACT

After departing Cuba, the Soviet naval squadron, which visited Havana July 20-27 on a goodwill call, carried out maneuvers in the Gulf of Mexico and there were some reports that it might visit a Mexican port. On August 4, however, it steamed out of the Gulf, apparently having waited in vain for an invitation. Before it left the Caribbean one unit of the Squadron called briefly in Martinique and another in Barbados. The Soviets are likely to follow up with subsequent naval visits and will probably seek to call at other Latin American ports in addition to Cuba.

Whatever else this first visit represented, it did provide new evidence of improved Soviet-Cuban relations. It also gave new significance to the question of Soviet intentions with respect

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to refueling and repair facilities in Cuba for their naval units operating in the Atlantic. That the visit may have been the opening move in an effort aimed at gradually introducing use of Cuban ports by Soviet missile subs should not be ruled out.

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Visit Underscores Improved Relations

The Soviet squadron's goodwill call in Havana to mark the 16th anniversary of the July 26 beginning of the Cuban Revolution represented further evidence of improved Soviet-Cuban relations. Both sides took advantage of the resulting atmospherics to emphasize this point. The Cuban press gave the visit heavy play, and on July 26 Prime Minister Castro, accompanied by President Dorticos and ranking members of the Cuban Politburo, went aboard the Soviet flagship. Castro delivered a speech there laying (for him) unusually heavy stress on Soviet-Cuban friendship. The Soviet commander, Rear Admiral S. S. Sokolan, answered in kind -- with added plaudits for the Cuban Communist Party and Revolutionary Government and for Fidel Castro personally.

Some 760 Soviet naval officers and men joined Castro the next day in cutting sugar cane not far from Havana. Castro described the event as a symbolic demonstration of cooperation between the two peoples and as "something internationalist, something beautiful." (One might well wonder whether the Soviet seamen agreed that cutting cane in 95° heat was "something beautiful.")

Meanwhile, back in Moscow, the Soviet press also gave the squadron's visit considerable play and took the occasion of the July 26 anniversary to run several long articles on Cuba itself -- its economy and cultural life. This was in marked contrast to the minimal coverage accorded the anniversary by the Soviet press during the past several years, and seems particularly significant in view of the fact that the Cubans themselves have downplayed July 26 this year, concentrating instead on the 10-million-ton sugar harvest Castro has promised to bring in. Other evidence of improved relations was seen in the fact that this year's "fraternal" greetings from the Soviet leadership to their Cuban counterparts on the occasion of the anniversary were considerably warmer and longer than those of the last several years.

Visit Probably a Soviet Initiative

While ostensibly made at the invitation of the Cuban Government, the visit may have been a Soviet initiative. For one thing, not only did the Cubans downplay the anniversary this year, but Castro had said that there would be no holiday and that the

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anniversary would not be observed until next year (following the harvest). It seems unlikely, therefore, that he would have chosen this particular date to invite a Soviet fleet. Moreover, it may be significant that the Soviets rather than the Cubans were the first to announce the visit. On the other hand, whether or not Castro initiated the invitation, he clearly welcomed the visit and probably hoped it would be interpreted as a gesture of Soviet willingness to defend socialism in Cuba against US power.

The Soviet vessels were at sea prior to President Nixon's June 28 announcement of his intention to visit Romania. Moreover, Castro himself said the invitation for the visit was extended before the President's announcement. Thus, the visit would seem not to have been initially prompted by, or intended as a response to, the President's Romanian trip. But while not the original intent, the Soviets may well have reasoned that, in the event, it served that purpose. Their July 6 announcement of the visit -- some two weeks before the vessels arrived in Havana and only 8 days after word of the President's trip -- may have been calculated to prompt speculation abroad that the one was intended as a response to the other.

#### Other Soviet Objectives

In addition to demonstrating a more cordial atmosphere between Moscow and Havana, and perhaps serving as an indirect riposte to the President's Romanian initiative, the visit was also part of the ongoing Soviet effort to establish the USSR as a global naval power -- and a convenient way to pay the US in kind for American naval excursions into the Black Sea. There is evidence that the Soviets hoped to show the flag in other Latin American ports on this voyage. A Soviet diplomat in Washington has stated that other such visits were contemplated, and there were reports that the Soviets hoped to secure an invitation for the squadron to visit Mexico. (Thus, it cruised several days in the Gulf apparently waiting for an invitation that never came.) The Soviets did show their naval ensign in Martinique and Barbados in addition to Havana, however, and by so doing may have hoped to suggest that France and Barbados (if not the US) are willing to accept with equanimity a Soviet naval presence in the area.

While Havana was the only Latin American port of call for this particular squadron, the matter is probably far from closed.

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Subsequent Soviet naval visits in the area are likely and efforts on their part to secure invitations for calls in OAS ports other than Barbados are to be expected.

Are Soviets Seeking Refueling and Repair Facilities in Cuba?

Soviet naval activity in the Caribbean gives new significance to the question of Soviet intentions with respect to naval facilities in Cuba. Moscow has consistently and vociferously condemned the West for its overseas bases and has shied away from any action that might open it to similar charges. It has not established any bases outside the communist world, and, while Cuba is a socialist state, it is most unlikely that the Soviets would seek formal base rights there either. They might well be interested, however, in securing in Cuba low-profile refueling, supply and repair facilities, such as, for example, those they now enjoy in UAR ports. Such facilities would be a definite convenience for them. They could, for example, increase the time "on station" for their missile submarines in the Atlantic.

Concern over US reaction to such a move would seem to be the primary inhibiting factor. It is unlikely that the Soviets would assess the convenience of such facilities in Cuba to be worth risking a strong US reaction -- and this seems especially unlikely at present when the main flow of Soviet diplomatic efforts vis-à-vis the US suggests a wish on their part for some improvement in bilateral relations. The Soviets may well fear that the US would interpret the periodic appearance of Soviet missile subs in Cuban ports as a reintroduction of Soviet strategic weapons and therefore react vigorously.

On the other hand, they may hope to secure the one without risking the other by proceeding on a gradual, step-by-step basis, pausing at each stage to test US reaction. Beginning with a "flag-showing" goodwill visit such as the one just completed, they would then follow up with other squadrons, including eventually perhaps missile submarines. Having accustomed the US to the presence of such units in the Caribbean, the final step to the use of Cuba as an advance support station for them would carry far fewer risks and, in effect, would be more in the way of presenting the US with a fait accompli.

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In addition to other purposes, then, both the precedent-setting call of Soviet combat vessels in Cuba and the presence in the Caribbean at the same time of a Soviet nuclear-powered attack (but non-missile) submarine may have represented the opening moves in an effort aimed at gradually opening Cuban ports to Soviet missile subs.

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